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Exploring Public Attitudes to Welfare Over the Longue Durée: Re-examination of Survey Evidence from Beveridge, Beatlemania, Blair and Beyond

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Abstract

It is commonly argued that public support for the welfare state is in long-term decline in the UK. Evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) is typically cited to support this claim, but it only stretches back to 1983. Few would disagree that the Thatcher years offered an unusual socio-political-economic context, which raises a question over whether the BSA's early 1980s baseline provides a misleading view on support for the welfare state over the longue durée. In this paper we explore this issue, piecing together data from the Beveridge era through to the present day, drawing on data from: contemporary studies and surveys; opinion polls; and, historical government surveys and reports. Our method is undoubtedly a 'second best approach', making use of often limited historical data, which means we remain cautious in offering bold findings. However, we argue there is some evidence to suggest the 1980s were an unusual moment, suggesting the decline in support for welfare is less dramatic than analysis of the BSA might make it seem, but also that support for the welfare state during the post-War consensus years the Welfare State was likely more equivocal than we often believe it to be from today's perspective, perhaps reflecting a tendency to reify this period as a 'golden age' of welfare and so underplaying the complexity of the politics of social policy in the pre-BSA period.

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Introduction: Declining Support for Welfare?

The House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee recently announced it would review the principles of social security, in part because 'over a long period of time, voters have been withdrawing support for Britain's welfare state on the basis that they believe it is no longer fair' (Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2015). The view that there has been a long term decline in public support for the welfare state in the UK is now close to an orthodox view. Supporting evidence for this perspective often comes from the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA), undoubtedly the most authoritative source of data on attitudes to welfare in the UK over time[1]. For instance, responses to the question *'should the government spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes?'* (figure 1) appear to show a relatively clear shift from strong majority support for additional spending in the 1980s to a much less supportive position today. This, and related BSA data showing fewer respondents prioritising additional spending on benefits for the unemployed (and more wanting cuts in spending) are often said to capture a 'hardening' of public attitudes since 1983/87 (Clery et al., 2013; Taylor-Gooby and Taylor, 2015).

[figure 1 here]

To provide just a few key examples of analyses of the BSA data, Deeming (2014: 6) argues they show a 'fundamental shift in public views on welfare provision over the past three decades' and that 'at the start of the 21st century, a distinct attitudinal shift begins to emerge'. That relatively few see benefits as inadequate and that some 62% believe that 'out-of-work benefits are too generous and promote the dependency culture' are, he suggests, especially key (Deeming, 2014: 6). Taylor-Gooby and Taylor (2015: 93) suggest the fact that people have remained 'relatively unsympathetic' to increased spending following the recent economic crisis is remarkable, particularly given this 'relative lack of change comes after years of a steady decline in support for spending on public services in general and on welfare in particular'. Similarly, Baumberg (2014a: 114) notes that movements in the BSA data in recent years 'are relatively slight in comparison to the more far-reaching hardening of attitudes that came in the preceding 10 to 15 years', though he contextualises this with an important reminder that BSA data show considerable support for welfare exists too and that 'Benefit attitudes are not simply "hard" or "soft" but complex and uneven' (Baumberg, 2014b).

The focus of this paper is not whether the dominant interpretation of the BSA is an accurate reading of the complex patterns of attitudes captured by the survey – the analyses we cite above are all robust in our view. Instead, we explore the possibility that the time frame covered by the BSA leads to a misleading view of the long-term picture. The BSA did not begin until the mid-1980s, meaning it cannot capture public attitudes to welfare during the 'golden age' of the welfare state that is commonly presumed to have run from the 1940s through to mid-1970s (Wincott, 2013); we review attitudes data covering the period from this period in order to place the BSA data in a broader historical context. In so doing, we question how far current attitudes are distinct from those found in the 'golden age' of the welfare state and offer an at least partial challenge to the orthodox view that there has been a long-term decline in public support for the welfare state. We highlight instead the often contradictory and ambivalent attitudes to welfare held both now and during the 'golden age' and question whether the BSA's early 1980s baseline provides a misleading baseline period from which to assess contemporary attitudes to welfare against.

Accounting for Time: the Challenge of Context

A useful conceptual distinction can be drawn between public/social attitudes (or public opinion), societal values and culture based on the degree of stability they display over time (Hudson, Jo and Keung, 2014). According to this framework:

Public attitudes are presumed to display a significant degree of temporal instability; as Gelissen (2008: 247) notes, public opinion is influenced by 'the immediate surrounding socio-economic conditions'. For instance, how deserving the unemployed are viewed to be has been shown to be

affected by the unemployment rate (van Oorschot, 2006). During the period we examine here, social security spending has varied from a low of around 5% of GDP during the Attlee governments to a high of more than 15% in the early 1990s (Crawford et al, 2009); responses to questions of whether social security spending should be increased or not will in part reflect this changing context. To this end, Curtice (2010) suggests attitudes often reflect a *'thermostatic' pattern*, support for additional public spending falling after a period in which public expenditure has risen and vice-versa.

Culture, by contrast, is a broad and comprehensive notion, often used to capture arguments that a dominant set of traditional beliefs (often stretching back many centuries) have shaped not only social policy but also broader social structures. For example, Opielka (2008) views religion as the foundation of differing social systems and Lockhart (2001) explains the origins of institutional differences by reference to a series of cultural types.

Societal values sit in-between culture and attitudes. Values are described as trans-situational and more immutable than attitudes (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004), representing the most lasting ideas regarding what is desirable and ultimately affecting attitudes (Aalberg, 2003: 5-8). However, societal values are more discrete and much less abstract than culture - being 'valid in a specific societal context (Haller, 2002: 143) – and are expected to show some change over time for values are 'dynamically stable' (Oyserman & Uskul, 2008: 149-150). Hudson, Jo and Keung (2014) suggest examples of societal values might include (strength of) traditional family values, (degree of) tolerance and strength of religiosity/importance of a faith.

Approaching the analysis of longitudinal attitudes data with these distinctions in mind implies that if context matters then the time frame of our analyses matter too. This is perhaps self-evident, but is an issue we often overlook when examining longitudinal data because the period of analysis is often dictated by the first and last available time points in the best available data set. For studies of attitudes to welfare in the UK, this means the baseline against which trends are judged is typically the early/mid-1980s when the BSA began. Viewed through the 'thermostat' lens, however, the 1980s is a problematic moment in which to capture attitudes, the historically significant social, political and economic changes of the decade providing an unusual context that likely saw the 'thermostat' dial turned round a good deal.

An additional reason to place the BSA data in a broader historical context is that when high quality time series data offers a relatively clear trend then the temptation is to 'fill in the blanks' by presuming the pre-survey years follow the same pattern, especially when commonly held theoretical presumptions about the past imply results would follow this pattern if only the data existed. More specifically, there may be a danger that a 'golden age' view of the welfare state leads us to believe the downward trend in some aspects of welfare support since the 1980s merely represents the 'tip of the iceberg' on the basis support must have been even higher still during the 'golden age' (Wincott, 2013; Hudson and Lunt et al, forthcoming). Uncovering past survey data helps us to assess whether this was the case or not.

In this paper we piece together a chronology of public attitudes to welfare from Beveridge to the start of the BSA in order to 'fill in' these blanks. We use evidence from a wide range of sources: opinion polls (mainly derived from three compendia of polls – Gallup, 1976; Hinton et al, 1996; Tyler, 1990 – but supplemented by searches for relevant polls not covered by these sources, particularly for the 1940s); private/unpublished polling/survey data (the Labour Party, National, and Nuffield College archives); one-off surveys of attitudes to welfare; and, longitudinal surveys of attitudes. We stress caution needs to be applied in ascertaining trends from these sources, which are often of lower quality than the BSA. Nonetheless, as Klein (1974: 408) observed in an earlier review of polling data, since it is impossible to go back to the 1950s, 60s or 70s 'to find out what people really thought, it seems worthwhile making the most of the best surveys we have got – while remembering their limitations'.

Attitudes to Welfare in the 1940s

It is commonly argued that the Second World War 'transformed social attitudes and social expectations' (Fraser, 1984: 210; Addison, 1975), but there were few quantitative surveys of public opinion in the 1940s that allow this claim to be assessed. Beveridge commissioned the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey, headed by G.D.H. Cole, to undertake a survey of 'consumer attitudes' to feed into his committee's work, but the Civil Service insisted it involve no direct questioning of the public (see Harris, 1977; Cole, 1971). Consequently, it offered a 'second hand' view of public attitudes. One Treasury memo dismissed the work as 'a collection of tittle-tattle', while another wryly commented that the reports circulated to the Beveridge Committee 'seem to have impressed the Chairman; they impressed no one else' (PRO/T161/1135). The government did not publish Cole's final report; consequently, opinion polls provide the only sources of quantitative data for this period.

A Gallup/ British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO, 1942) poll conducted two weeks after the publication of the Beveridge Report showed 'nineteen people out of twenty had heard of the report, and nine out of ten believed its proposals should be adopted' (Calder, 1969: 528). Jacobs (1993, p. 113) cites this poll to support the conclusion that 'the Beveridge Report's publication became, in effect, a lightning rod, serving as a focus and indisputable symbol of existing public attitudes'. Much less frequently reported is that the same Gallup/BIPO research concluded that public understanding of the detail of Beveridge proposals was somewhat limited. Moreover, it was also clear from this poll that some areas were welcomed more strongly than others; health reforms had the clearest approval (88% in favour) and (better) pensions were most commonly cited as capturing the substance of the Beveridge Report. A bigger role for the state was not favoured in all policy areas though, 68% agreeing 'there is no reason why a childless widow should get a pension for life: if she is able to work, she should work'. However, the overwhelming message from the Gallup/BIPO report was that people were supportive of the Beveridge Report, some 88% of respondents feeling the government should put the plan into operation.

Several histories of social policy suggest that an initially muted government response to the Beveridge Report was modified 'in response to public opinion' (Jones, 1991: 132). The 1942 BIPO research showed a large minority had doubts over whether the plan would be enacted. Another Gallup/BIPO poll (March 1943) was conducted following debate of the Report in Parliament, respondents asked 'On the Beveridge report, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the government's attitudes as explained by the government ministers in Parliament?: 29% were satisfied, 47% dissatisfied and 24% no opinion (Hinton et al, 1996). Jacobs (1993: 114) cites this as evidence of growing public disillusionment at the government's failure to act on the report, but examination of the original polling data shows a follow up question was posed to those offering a negative view, and the range of responses here offers a more nuanced picture. Broadly[2], the most common reasons for a negative response were indeed frustrations with slow progress/a fear the report would be shelved (around 30%) or, more strongly, that the troops/working class were being betrayed (around 20%); however, around 30% expressed frustration at the lack of/level of debate (which might be read as pro- or anti-reform), around 10% felt the war should come first/money might not be available, a clearly anti-Beveridge view and another 10% were against the proposals for other reasons (some due to perceived capture by business others simply expressing disagreement with the Report). This perhaps suggests that public opinion was not quite so fully behind the view that the wartime government was failing to prioritise responding to Beveridge as sometimes suggested.

Further Gallup/BIPO polling during 1943 (Hinton et al, 1996) lends some support to the view that the Beveridge project was not quite as high in the concerns of the ordinary voters as sometimes presumed. In a September 1943 poll only 1.95% cited 'Beveridge; social security; pensions' when asked 'What do you think is the most important war problem the Government must solve during the next few months?' and a broadly similar proportion mentioned other welfare state issues such as health and housing; war objectives were clearly the top concern, but strikes, fuel shortages and unemployment all ranked higher than Beveridge. We might naturally expect war objectives to be

the dominating concerns in the midst of the Second World War, but polling data from the immediate post-War period also suggests a certain degree of ambivalence towards social policy issues. Economic questions generally topped the public's list of pressing concerns in these polls, social policy issues doing so only very briefly when housing problems in the immediate aftermath of the War resulted in it being the top concern in July 1945 (Gallup, 1976) and January 1946 (Klein, 1974: 409). It is also striking that BIPO polling during the War years included very modest numbers of questions on welfare state related issues, suggesting – irrespective of public attitudes – that the welfare state did not seem to feature prominently in the minds of the pollsters[3].

None of this means there was not strong support for the welfare state reform agenda that followed the War; in fact, by February 1946 there was 71% approval of the government's plan for Social Security according to a Gallup poll. However, there were some signs that health and pensions were the areas most strongly associated with the welfare state; indeed, in July 1948 Gallup poll 'Free doctor' (46%), 'Pensions increase' (31%) and Dentist (20%) were the top responses to the question *'Can you mention three of the main benefits available to you under the new Social Security Act which operate from July 5th?'*[4].

Attitudes to Welfare in the 1950s

Polling became more frequent in the 1950s and support for extending the welfare state could be found in many of the decade's polls (Gallup, 1976). In both 1951 and 1954 there was a 90% positive response to the question: 'Do you think that Old Age Pensions' should be increased or left as they are?' An April 1953 Gallup poll (table 1) probed views on spending in a range of areas, finding particularly strong support for increases in pensions (even if taxes rise) and housing, but a very substantial minority (43%) favoured cuts in family allowances and around a quarter did for health and education. That said, the same poll found much stronger support for cutting defence spending (51%), as did a September 1955 Gallup poll where defence (32%) topped the list should spending cuts be required, while welfare state cuts were selected by few respondents (schools and health both 4%; housing 2%).

[table 1 here]

A detailed view of attitudes to the welfare state is found in a survey conducted in 1957/8 by Political and Economic Planning (PEP, 1961). Their study elicited the views of 'ordinary families' on the basis that the welfare state was targeted at all, not merely the most needy. Reflecting the dominant view of the time that 'ordinary' equalled nuclear family, it only included households containing at least one child aged under 16 (so representing only c. 40% of all households). The survey focused solely on London in the first instance, adding a subsidiary sample of households in Northampton once early analysis underlined that the income levels of the London households were likely to be higher than was the case nationally (PEP, 1961: 14–19). In each case, the target of the interviews was 'mothers'. The findings are therefore clearly not a representative sample of the UK population, but its large sample of over 900 households, and detailed questionnaire, means it still offers a rich picture of citizen views on the nascent welfare state.

[Figure 2 here]

Despite rapid increases in social spending over the preceding decade, only around one third felt too much was being spent on some services and just over quarter believed that their family contributed too much to the cost of social services; 66% said the government should spend more. There seemed to be little dissatisfaction with key social services at this juncture, the exception being housing, which a substantial minority (31%) said had been of insufficient help to them (PEP, 1961: 20). Given that the survey excluded many of the most vulnerable groups, this underlines that public perceptions of the adequacy of housing in the early post-war period were not favourable. Indeed, housing topped the list of social services on which respondents felt the government should spend more (49%), echoing concerns in 1940s & 1950s polls reported above. The broad overall degree of

contentment with the welfare state was also qualified in some other ways. There were differences in opinion towards universal services/benefits versus those that were targeted and contributory versus non-contributory benefits/services (Figure 2). Despite fewer households making use of the non-contributory benefits – or, perhaps, because of this – they were more often picked out as being areas where the government spent too much money: 20% saying this was so for Family Allowances[5] (by far the most common choice), 7% for National Assistance and just 2% for National Insurance. Interestingly, the report's authors were clear in their view that connection with the concept of a 'welfare state' was not particularly deep or widespread and that for many of the respondents 'the Welfare State was more or less synonymous with health services' (PEP, 1961: 35). More strongly still, they concluded that 'The attitude of [respondents] towards the social services was enthusiastic rather than critical, but there is not much doubt that this attitude is governed by their enthusiasm for the health services' (PEP, 1961: 39).

In 1959 Labour suffered their third successive General Election defeat, the Conservative's margin of victory increasing on each occasion. Abrams and Rose (1960) conducted a detailed survey of public attitudes for *Socialist Commentary.* Although their survey was actually carried out in January/February 1960, it acts as the best available proxy for attitudes to welfare data at the close of the 1950s. On the 'willingness to pay more taxes for social benefits', 35% offered a straight yes (15% a qualified yes), 36% a straight no (4% a qualified no) and 10% 'other answers'. While the range of response options complicates interpretation, it seems fair to conclude that while there was a balance of opinion towards increases, a very substantial minority of people were now unwilling to pay more taxes for social benefits (Abrams and Rose, 1960: 19). In terms of where respondents felt public spending should be focused, there were clear echoes of the PEP survey, with Abrams and Rose (1960: 19) noting that 'Conservative and Labour supporters, middle-class and working-class people, agreed in giving top priority to hospitals'. More than half of each of these groups also felt more should be spent on schools and housing.

While the survey's modest sample (n=724) should be noted, its approach was sophisticated for its time and the findings troubled the Labour Party enough to attract the attention of the its National Executive Committee (NEC) for whom the Party's Research Department prepared a detailed briefing (LAB/RD.87/1960). From a social policy perspective, the survey found that both Conservative and Labour voters felt Labour was most likely to be the party that 'would extend welfare services', but even amongst Labour voters only a minority selected extending welfare services as one of the key characteristics of a good political party (Abrams and Rose, 1960: 13-16). Findings such as this – and similar ones pointing to general ambivalence towards nationalisation – led Abrams and Rose to question whether Labour could appeal to a society in which traditional industrial occupations were in decline. The appeal of state ownership was also debated by the party's Housing Group following the election defeat, the Party's Research Department noting that 'the ideal of owning one's own house is one that a large majority of the population share', an unattributed 1957 survey finding '65% of all interviewed said they had a strong preference for owning their own house, 6% more had the same preference though less strongly' (LAB/RD8/1959: 7).

Attitudes to Welfare in The 1960s

Labour, of course, did go on to win the 1964 & 1966 General Elections (albeit with a platform rooted in the rhetoric of modernisation and meritocracy). A decade after the PEP survey, *New Society* magazine undertook a detailed survey of attitudes to the welfare state in 1967, a sample of c. 1,300 households responding to questions on a wide range of topics that included housing, health, education and social security (see Nevitt, 1967; Wedderburn, 1967; Forsyth, 1967; Donnison, 1967; Wiseman, 1967). Figure 3 shows attitudes towards future spending balanced a little more towards favouring increased spending (56%) than against (33%); just one third felt that too much was spent on some social services. Questions probing personal experience of the welfare state

suggested a fairly equally split between those viewing it as a great help and those seeing it helping a little/none at all. Notably, health was again by far and away the part of the welfare state most commonly cited as being of most help to respondents.

[figure 3 here]

The complexity of attitudes was highlighted by responses to questions on the operation of the Supplementary Benefit/National Assistance safety net. A large majority (73%) agreed there were 'many people drawing supplementary benefit/national assistance who could really be earning enough to support themselves if they wanted to', but a similarly large majority (71%) agreed 'there are many people who need to draw supplementary benefit/national assistance but who are not doing so'. Wedderburn (1967: 516) argued this showed 'the concept of the "deserving" and ''undeserving" poor is still very much alive'. Deserving/undeserving stereotypes (van Oorschot, 2000; 2006; Hudson and Lunt et al, forthcoming) could certainly be found in other survey responses; of those who felt too much was being spent on a social service, 'National Assistance is too easy' was the most common reason given (17%), while around 10% cited that family allowance 'wasn't spent on children' and a similar proportion saying 'parents should subsidise their own children' (Wiseman, 1967). By contrast, 'OAPs need more money' was the most common reason given (27%) by those who felt more money needed to be spent (ibid.).

Some scepticism towards state intervention in housing was evident, 88% saying council housing should be targeted towards 'those most in need' and 61% that council tenants should be able to buy their council houses compared with 33% saying it should be kept as a pool of public housing (Nevitt, 1967). Public concerns over the efficacy of spending could even be seen in relation to health spending too; while the NHS was the second most common area of the welfare state to be highlighted as meriting further spending, it was also the service (as opposed to cash benefit) most often flagged as an area for cuts amongst those feeling too much was being spent on some social services, 'abuse of free prescriptions' a concern for some (Forsyth, 1967).

Snippets of data such as these hint at some public concern over the scale of the welfare state during the 1960s which a series of studies conducted by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) aimed to explore (see Seldon and Gray, 1967). Although some concerns about the IEA's approach means we should interpret their findings cautiously[6], some important points emerge. Firstly, they suggested that opinion was not quite so firmly behind the welfare consensus as commonly presumed, though we must underline that even the IEA's work was rooted in an attempt to challenge what they described as the 'assumption that reform away from universal benefits was politically impossible' (Seldon, 1967: 11). Secondly, important variations in strength of support between groups/geographic areas were identified. For example, IEA's 1966 survey found the working class, council tenants and people living in Scotland or the north of England were more likely to support universalism (Seldon, 1967: 17-21).

In 1968, at the behest of Richard Crossman, the government commissioned a survey of public attitudes to welfare to feed into the work of the newly established Department of Health and Social Security. However, with echoes of the 1940s, Treasury concerns meant questioning was mainly restricted to a test of public understanding of current benefits and the report was never published[7] (see: PRO/BN/72/31, PRO/T227/2592 and PRO/T227/3094). The survey's findings provide some useful, albeit limited, insights (PRO/T227/3094). Questions on the awareness of health and social security financing showed much confusion amongst the public about the operation of the welfare state, be it in terms of principles of finance or benefit and contribution rates. When asked if they would like to pay higher contributions to get a higher pension, around half said they would prefer to stick with current contributions for current benefits and just one-third would want to contribute more in order to receive more. Around 65% of respondents said they would be willing to pay more to help specific 'vulnerable groups', though variations in terms of which groups they would like to support reflected common deserving/undeserving stereotypes: 'old people living alone' and groups of disabled people were high on the list of those people were willing to pay more to support further,

while only a very small minority supported extra spending for 'men who are homeless because they are alcoholics', 'deserted wives', or 'men who are homeless because they are ex-prisoners', for example.

Taken together, 1960s data suggest some aspects of social policy were looked upon disapprovingly by many, and there was at least a substantial minority (if not more) who felt that targeting may be beneficial in some areas. In his review of polling data from the 1940s to 1960s, Klein (1974: 411) argued public opinion 'tends to be moralistic [… and this] emerges clearly when opinions about pensions and family allowances are compared. With remarkable consistency over the years, there is a very large majority which favours raising pensions and a very large minority which is highly critical of family allowances'. Interestingly, he also reported findings from a private poll carried out by ORC for the Conservative Party in 1968 that showed 89% agreed that 'Too many people don't bother to work because they can live well enough on the dole', and 78% agreed that 'We have so many Social Services that people work less hard than they used to'. Klein's (1974: 412) view was this showed there was 'overwhelming support for a moralistic view of the Welfare State'.

Attitudes to Welfare in the 1970s

Arguably the most detailed investigation of public attitudes to welfare in the 1970s was that undertaken by the Leicester University Centre for Mass Communication (LUCMC). Its 'Information and the Welfare State' project was based on fieldwork in Leicester and Sunderland in 1977, with a stratified proportionate sample of 650 people. It provides a valuable exploration of attitudes following a rise in economic pressures and widespread negative media coverage of a prominent welfare fraud trial portrayed as an example of 'wasteful' government spending, but prior to what are typically deemed to be the peak years of the 1970s crisis marked by the 1978/9 'Winter of Discontent'. Figure 4 provides a snapshot of key findings.

[Figure 4]

Although we need to exercise caution given its modest sample, the survey's big-picture question on whether too much is spent on social security might be taken to suggest a hardening of attitudes when compared to the *New Society* study undertaken a decade earlier. Whereas the latter found just 33% felt too much was spent on *some* social services, when directly asked about social security in the LUCMC study, 47% felt too much was spent on welfare and social security (Golding and Middleton 1982: 182 f/n5; PRO/BN/82/133). The two studies offered different response options, so the results cannot be directly compared, but other sources provide some additional evidence to suggest there *may* have been a hardening of attitudes towards social spending over the course of the late-1960s/early 1970s. Butler and Stokes (1974) report the findings from representative surveys of the electorate conducted during this period for their *Political Change in Britain* project and, as figure 5 shows, there appears to be a shift towards favouring tax reductions over increases in social spending between 1963 and 1970[8]. These aspects of the LUCMC and *Political Change in Britain* surveys do seem to suggest a decline in willingness to pay for expanding social services over this period. The LUCMC survey also seemed to reflect the *New Society* study in detecting a strong degree of scepticism amongst the public over the efficacy of parts of the welfare state. While a large majority of respondents agreed that 'the welfare state in this country is still something we can be really proud of', around 70% agreed there is 'so much welfare now it's made the people of this country lazy' and around 80% believed that 'nowadays too many people depend on welfare'.

[Figure 5]

The British Election Study, which followed on from Butler and Stokes' *Political Change in Britain* project from 1974 onwards, suggests support for cutting the welfare state increased between the 1974[9] and 1979 General Elections; while a clear majority felt social services and benefits should be expanded or stay as they were rather than being cut in 1974 (64% v 32%), by 1979 this was no longer the case, with the two camps fairly evenly sized but with more favouring cuts (46% v 50%). There was a similar shift over this period on the question of whether welfare benefits have 'gone

too far', moving from a position in 1974 where only one-third felt the system had gone 'too far' to one in 1979 where almost half (49%) felt that way. However, we can point to some contradictory elements in the survey responses that complicate matters. In the 1979 survey, when respondents were probed in another question on the strength of their views regarding tax cuts versus service cuts, almost two-thirds (62%) favoured keeping up services; we might also note responses to this question showed feelings seemed to run stronger amongst those favouring 'keeping up services', their responses more likely to be 'fairly' or 'very' strong.

Placing the BSA Trends in a Longer Context

In an attempt to crudely summarise the longer run picture, figure 6 plots data from across different surveys we have reviewed with question as close to possible to the BSA question *'should the government spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes?*'; though variations in question wording, survey design and underlying context mean the different data sources are not comparable, plotting the data in this way helps visualise what may have been a 'bounce' in support for welfare spending in the 1980s. Though an admittedly crude exercise, we offer it as a (visual) heuristic device and believe it usefully demonstrates a *prima facie* case that, over the *longue durée*, public support for expanding welfare has *fluctuated* over time rather than merely *declined*. Importantly, part of the case for the view that there was a 'bounce' in pro-welfare attitudes in the 1980s comes from the *British Election Study* data which allows to track views from as far back as 1974[10]. As table 2 shows while a higher proportion of respondents said welfare benefits had 'gone too far' in 1992 and 1987 than did in 1983, the share that did so was much greater in 1974 and, especially so, in 1979, suggesting the BSA may well show a different picture had it begun a decade earlier. Though not relating directly to welfare state provision, Gallup polling on the causes of poverty using a consistent question from the 1960s to the 1980s also supports the view that public attitudes were more sympathetic in the 1980s (table 2), a much higher proportion viewing poverty as being caused by circumstances than lack of effort in the 1980s than in the 1960s or 1970s. Opinion polling by Gallup on NHS spending (table 2) also suggests an spending bounce for health when the 1960s are compared with the 1980s (New Society, 1980).

[Figure 6]

In short, having offered a brief tour of headline findings in surveys from 1942-1979, a broader historical perspective challenges the orthodox view that 'over a long period of time, voters have been withdrawing support for Britain's welfare state on the basis that they believe it is no longer fair' as the Work and Pensions Select Committee (2015) suggest? The picture is not straightforward – as Baumberg (2014b) notes attitudes are complex and uneven – but the historical data do provide at least some support for the suggestion that the BSA's baseline of 1983 (or shortly thereafter) offers a misleading view on trends in attitudes to welfare. A number of studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s suggest that the balance of opinion shifted from favouring expansion of the welfare state towards a view that the welfare state had grown enough, with more respondents starting to favour tax cuts and pointing to problems seen to be associated with the welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s. It may be that, rather than the hardening of views from the mid-1990s reflecting a long-term decline in support for the welfare state, the BSA data reflect there was a '*softening'* of views during the 1980s. This raises many intriguing questions, including whether the shifts in *attitudes* detected in the BSA data since the 1980s reflect a long term movement in underlying *societal values* or the fluctuating *thermostat effect* expected when underlying contexts are in flux.

[Table 2]

We cannot here offer a detailed review of the many issues raised by the historical data we have compiled for this paper[11], but in addition to challenging the picture of a long-term decline in support for welfare presented by the BSA data, the historical data also accords with much that is found in contemporary BSA data. It is clear that there has been a strong hierarchy of preferences

around social spending that has persisted throughout much of the period being examined; health is typically the most popular area by some distance, with education and pensions also typically high in the list of social spending priorities. Support for working-age cash benefits, particularly the unemployed, tends to be lower than support for services. One important exception may be around family/child benefits, where support may have increased considerably in recent years, this being cited by many more as a top priority for social security spending after decades of being ranked as one of the lowest priorities[12]. There does also appear to be a moralistic tone reflected in much of the data. Surveys conducted in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s often betrayed very clear notions of there being distinct groups of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (Hudson and Lunt et al, forthcoming). 'Hard' attitudes are very much in evidence in surveys conducted in the late 1960s and 1970s, large majorities in some surveys agreeing that welfare interventions made people work less hard and/or that much welfare spending was going to the wrong places. However, the same surveys often showed a good degree of support for expanding welfare, underlining that critical attitudes towards some aspects of welfare (and the groups in receipt of it) do not automatically align with a desire for deep cuts in spending.

Indeed, a still bigger picture underscored by a longer run view of attitudes data, is that (a) the welfare state is rarely a matter at the top of the agenda for the public, (b) that over time attitudes have been fairly balanced in terms of support for/against more spending/tax/services, and (c) most of the public have a rather hazy knowledge of the details of policy. It does not seem to be the case, from the data we have uncovered, that public opinion was strongly and enthusiastically behind the 'welfare state' during its 'golden age' but, equally, the converse is also true; the public have not been strongly and enthusiastically behind attempts to cut the welfare state either. After undertaking his own very detailed survey of public attitudes to welfare shortly before the BSA began, Taylor-Gooby (1982: 344) noted that people's attitudes towards welfare displayed 'a lack of internal consistency' or 'duality' (Taylor-Gooby, 1982: 344), his data highlighting a rather balanced set of views but also a good degree of ambivalence to welfare issues in which 'The dominant note is a grudging acceptance of state welfare cut across by an ideology of individualism' (Taylor-Gooby, 1983: 52) pointing to 'pragmatic acceptance' rather than 'positive commitment' to welfare (Beedle and Taylor-Gooby, 1983: 15).

The phrase 'pragmatic acceptance' perhaps captures the picture since the Beveridge reforms well. While support may have hardened in some ways over time this should not be misread for a loss of support; there is still considerable support for the welfare state and there may be more continuity here over the past 70 years than is commonly thought. Indeed, dominant perceptions of trends in public support for the welfare state may be shaped by two overly bold characterisations: one concerning a perceived drop in support since the 1980s, the other concerning the overwhelming support for the welfare state in the early post-war period.

Although it is a commonly held view that public support for the welfare state has declined considerably since the 'golden age of the welfare state' of the 1950s and 1960s, empirical evidence to support this claim is far from decisive. From today's perspective where political opinion and media portrayals of welfare often seem overtly hostile it is tempting to conclude that those sympathetic to the welfare state are sailing in historically hostile waters (Jensen, 2014) or that those making the political case for the welfare state found it easier to deliver change in the 'golden age' because they were buoyed by strongly supportive public opinion. But our review of historical data suggests that there was a good deal of hostile public opinion during the post-war welfare consensus period. A longue durée perspective offers a useful corrective in challenging overly simplistic presumptions about the politics of social policy in the past that in turn risk fuelling overly pessimistic views about the possibilities for social policy in the present and future.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] Though not our focus here, for the avoidance of doubt it should be acknowledged at the outset that the BSA data do not all point to a downward trend in public support for welfare nor do they suggest contemporary public attitudes are overwhelmingly hostile (see Baumberg, 2014a, 2014b; Clery et al, 2013; Taylor-Gooby and Taylor, 2015). Indeed, in 2011 51% of BSA respondents agreed that 'the creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements' compared with just 15% disagreeing with this statement (Clery et al., 2013).

[2] 19 different responses were classified, 46% of the sample did not respond and 10% offered an unclassified response)

[3] This, of course, may well have affected the opinion data we have inherited from them. We might add here Macnicol's (1998: 387-8) useful warning that 'when attempting to evaluate public responses to the Beveridge proposals […] a number of problems present themselves [… including that] During the entire war there operated in Britain a massive and sophisticated government propaganda campaign [… and that] Censorship, patriotism, the social confusion of wartime, the disruptive effect of military call-up, plus numerous practical factors (such as the paper shortages) created a society in which dissident views found little outlet [… and] political criticism was muted, not only inside parliament but also in public life generally.'.

[4] This is the wording recorded in the Gallup archive, if not of the actual acts.

[5] This likely reflected moralistic attitudes about families with larger numbers of children being undeserving of government support: see Welshman (2013) on 1940s debates about 'problem families'..

[6] For example, though focused on 'universalism', the IEA's own summary of the research noted that ''universalism' has been interpreted fairly loosely' (Gray, 1967: footnote, page 65)

[7] A recent biography of Abel-Smith (Sheard, 2014: 226) makes passing reference to the survey and the secrecy around it, noting 'the handful of officials who knew about it were asked not to make its existence known'. Crossman tried slip headlines from the survey into the public domain, but when the Treasury got wind of this they blocked it in no uncertain terms on the basis the Chancellor was 'very much concerned with the balance between contributions and taxation' and so has 'now asked that no press notice should be issued until he has had an opportunity to consider the full results of the survey […] and to discuss with the Secretary of State [Crossman] what conclusions should be drawn from them and what public statements should be made about them' (PRO/T227/3094)

[8] There are contradictory elements in the responses to the *Political Change in Britain* surveys; though in the 1966 survey some 55% of respondents said they favoured tax cuts over more spending on the social services, when asked 'Do you think the government should spend more on pensions and social services or do you feel that spending for social services should stay about as it is now?', 55% opted for more spending (Butler and Stokes, 1974: Appendix B).

[9] Practical constraints meant only one post-election survey was conducted in 1974 despite there being two General Elections that year

[10] Although, countering this advantage, is that the wording of the most pertinent question posed to respondents is clumsy and, unfortunately, the response options were simplified for the 1983 survey.

[11] A detailed description of the data sources used here and an overview of key findings can be found online at https://goo.gl/Tk2Fek

[12] This may reflect changes to the structure and recipient base of child/family benefits over the many decades considered here. The broad brush analysis we are able to offer here loses the nuance about programme rules affecting attitudes that more detailed exploration of examples such as these would allow.

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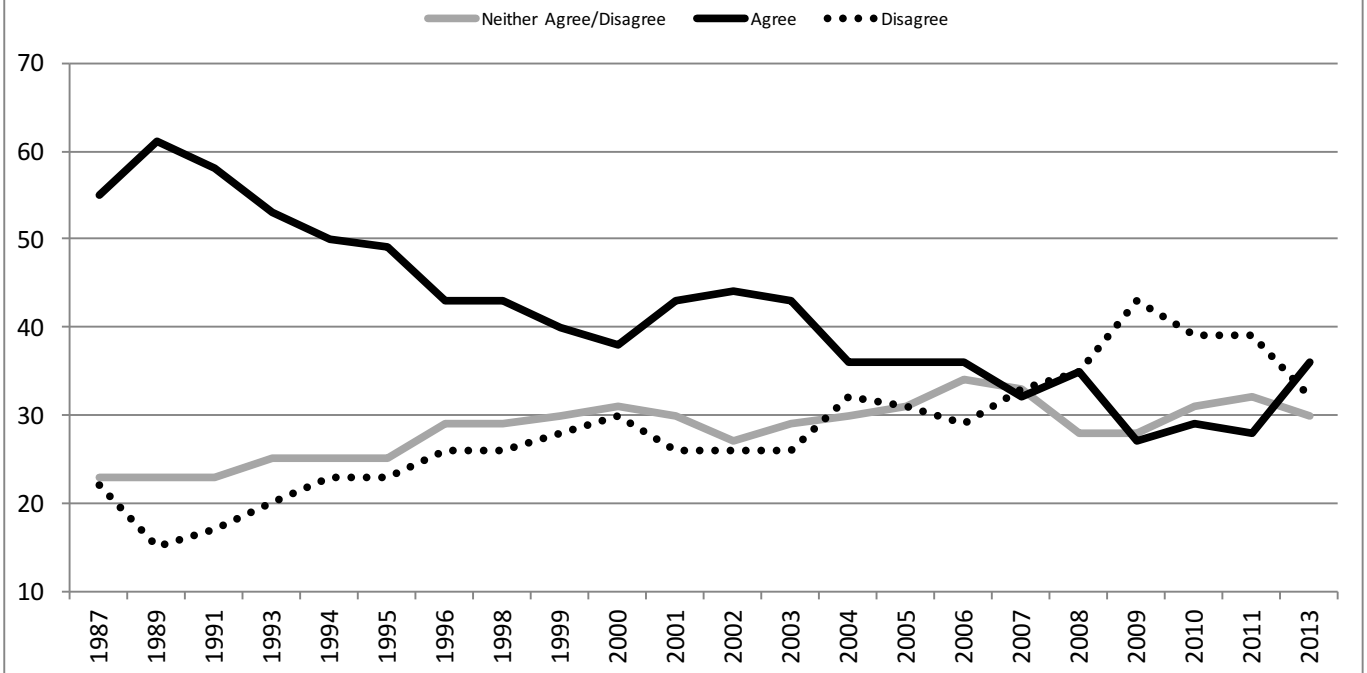
Tables & Figures

Figure 1: The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes



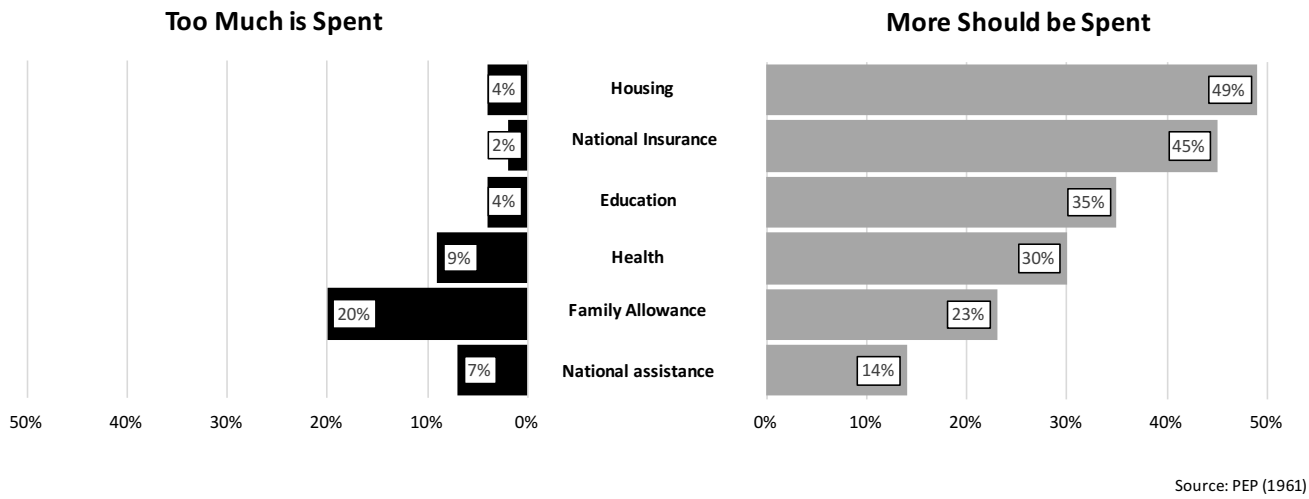
Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

Table 1: Gallup 1953 Poll on Spending Preferences

	Favour Increased Spending		Favour Reduced Spending
		...even if it means tax rises	
Pensions	81%	59%	6%
Housing	59%	35%	15%
Education	42%	26%	24%
Health	30%	17%	26%
Family Allowances	23%	13%	43%

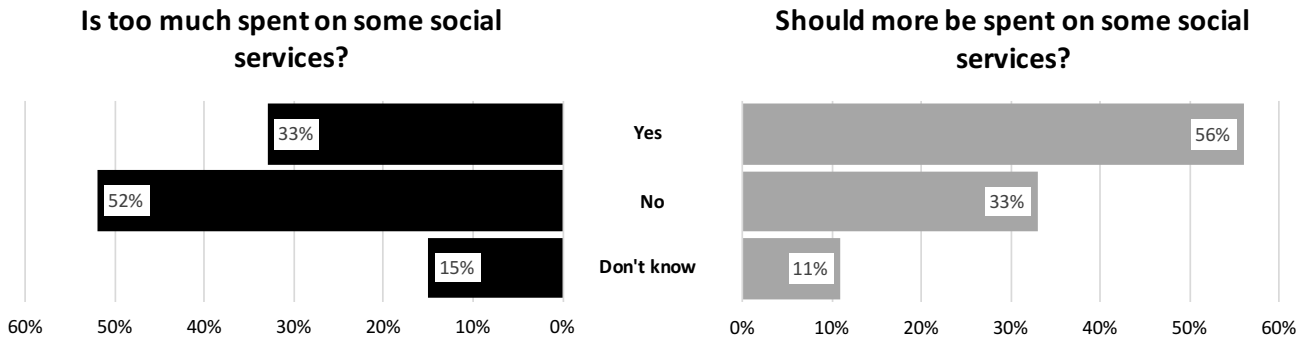
Source: Gallup (1976)

Figure 2: Selected Responses to 1957/8 PEP Survey



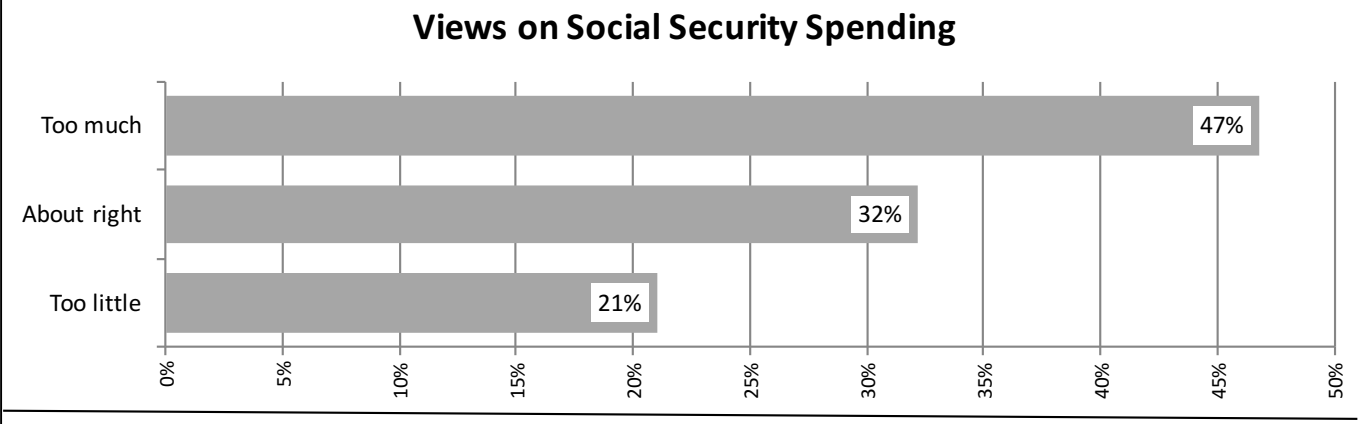
Source: PEP (1961)

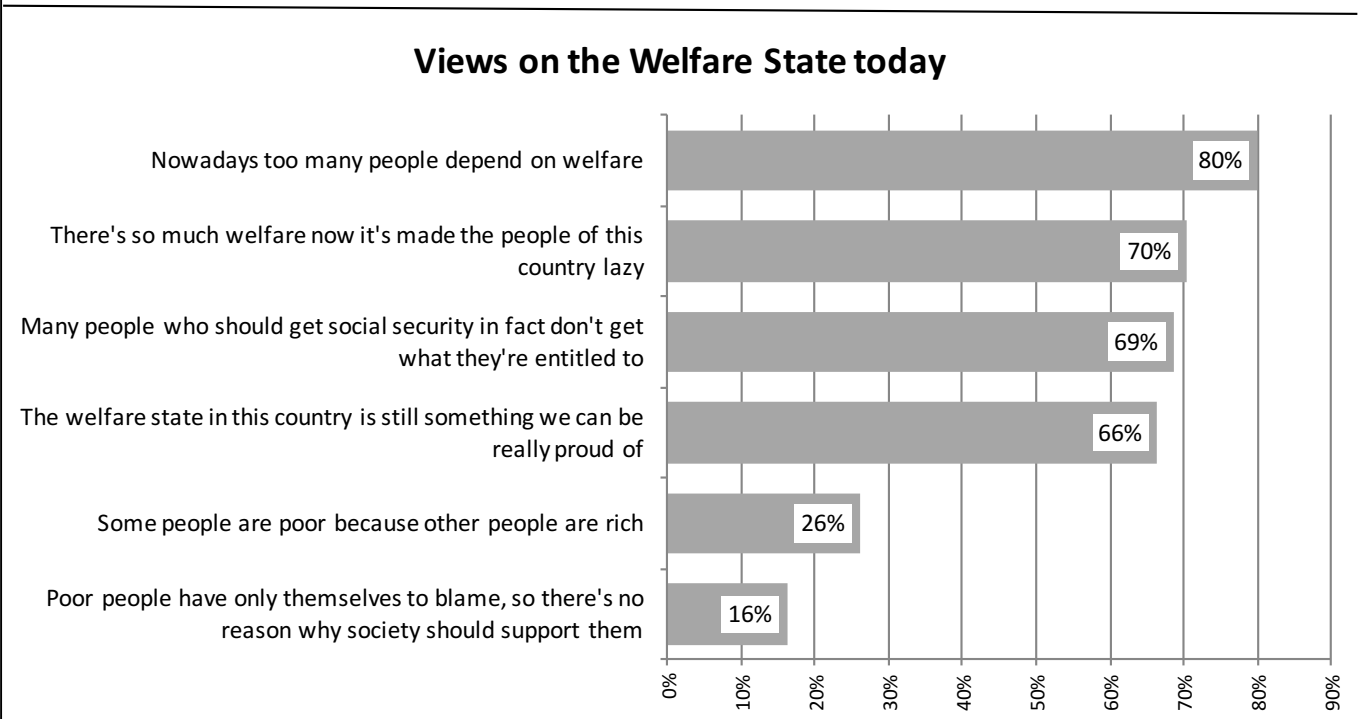
Figure 3: Selected Responses to 1967 *New Society* Survey



Source: Wiseman (1967)

Figure 4: Selected Responses from 1977 LUCMC Survey





Sources: PRO/BN 82/133; Golding & Middleton, 1982

Figure 5: If the Government had a choice between reducing taxes or spending more on social services, which should it do?

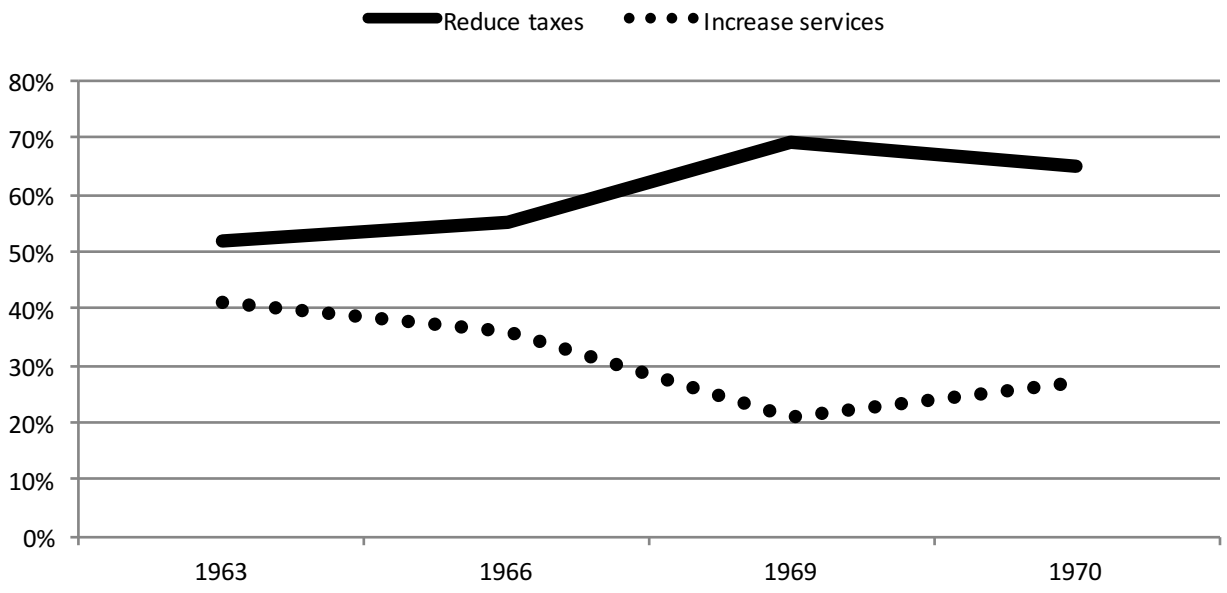


Figure 6: Combining Surveys - Should (Social Security) Spending Increase?

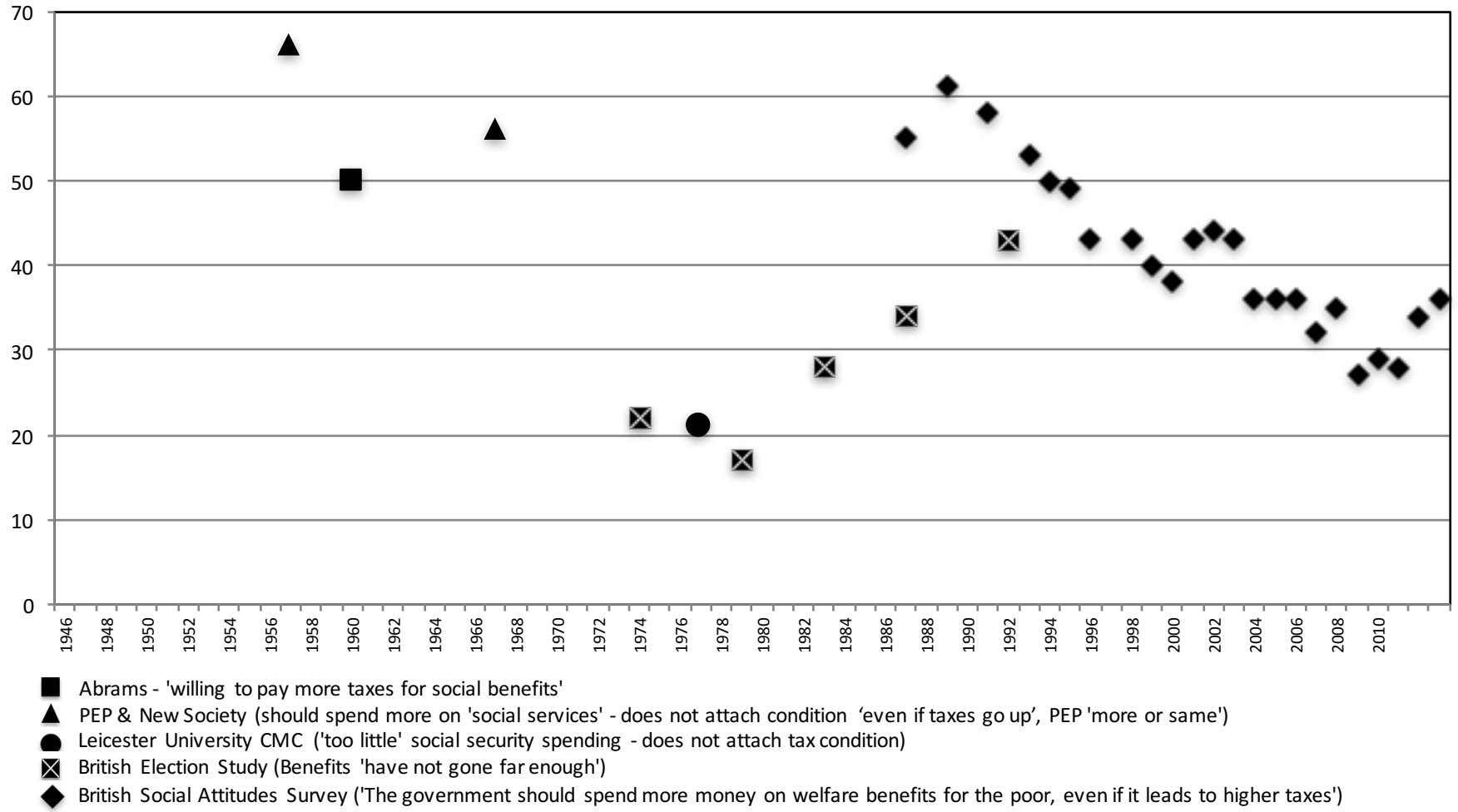


Table 2: Additional Data Supporting the 1980s 'Bounce' Thesis							
Year	**British Election Study: Welfare Benefits**			**Gallup: Causes of Poverty**		**Gallup: NHS Spending**	
	Too far/much too far	*About right*	*Not quite far enough/not nearly far enough*	*Lack of Effort*	*Circumstances*	*Too much*	*Too little*
1961	-	-	-	-	-	23%	30%
1964	-	-	-	28%	38%	-	-
1965	-	-	-	-	-	17%	23%
1968	-	-	-	35%	30%	-	-
1974	33%	42%	22%	-	-	-	-
1975	-	-	-	-	-	10%	54%
1977	-	-	-	33%	30%	-	-
1979	49%	32%	17%	-	-	-	-
1980	-	-	-	-	-	4%	70%
1983	19%	49%	28%	-	-	-	-
1985	-	-	-	21%	49%	-	-
1987	24%	39%	34%	-	-	-	-
1992	16%	35%	43%	-	-	-	-
	Source: British Election Study (Crewe et al, 1974-1979; Heath et al, 1983-1992)			*Sources: Gallup (1976), Tyler (1990), New Society (1980)*			